

# Western Black-eared/Eastern Black-eared/Pied Wheatear

*Oenanthe hispanica/melanoleuca/pleschanka*

Very rare vagrant.

1 record, 1 bird

*World/British distribution (Holt et al. 2019, 2020, 2021):*

Western Black-eared Wheatear breeds in north-west Africa, Iberia, southern France and northern Italy. It winters in northern tropical Africa. Eastern Black-eared Wheatear breeds from southern Italy to Greece and in south-west Asia from Turkey to the Caucasus, south to Israel and south-west Iran. It winters in northern tropical Africa. Pied Wheatear breeds from eastern Romania and Bulgaria, eastwards through the Ukraine, southern Siberia, Kazakhstan and Mongolia to northern China. It winters in eastern Africa and the Arabian Peninsula.

*Kent status (KOS 2022):*

Very rare vagrant.

British (BBRC) records to end 2020: There have been 61 national records of “Black-eared Wheatear” (which will need to be reviewed) and 89 records of Pied Wheatear.

Kent (KOS) records to end 2020: There have been two county records of “Black-eared Wheatear”, both of which were thought to be Western Black-eared Wheatear (although have not formally been reviewed), and four records of Pied Wheatear.

A recent study confirmed that Western Black-eared Wheatear and Eastern Black-eared Wheatear are genetically distinct and suggested that these two taxa should be recognised as full species (Schweizer *et al.* 2019), with this approach being formerly adopted in the IOC World Bird List the following year (IOC 2020). As Holt *et al.* (2019) noted, if this “split” was accepted then a full review of previous British records would become necessary to clarify which taxon was involved.

The first “Black-eared Wheatear” was seen in Britain at Greater Manchester in May 1875, whilst the first that could be ascribed to the Western species was seen at Spurn in Yorkshire in September 1892 and first ascribed to the Eastern species was also seen in Greater Manchester in March 1915. There had been five further records of Western, two of Eastern and one indeterminate in Britain by 1958 (thus an overall total of 11 records of “Black-eared Wheatear”). All occurrences from 1958 will be reviewed by the British Birds Rarities Committee (BBRC) in an attempt to ascribe them to species. The first British Pied Wheatear was shot on the Isle of May in October 1909, with a further two by 1958.

Pied continued to be the rarer of the two species (as they were then considered), with one Pied in the 1960s, three in the 1970s and ten in the 1980s, compared to five “Black-eared” in the 1960s, 11 in the 1970s and 13 in the 1980s. The 1990s saw a reversal in fortunes, when there were 24 Pied, with 19 in the 2000s and 26 in the 2010s, whilst “Black-eared” decreased to 12 in the 1990s, three in the 2000s and five in the 2010s. Holt *et al.* (2019) remarked on the decline of the “Black-eared” Wheatear in Britain, noting how “this contrasts with the 2 to 3 Pied Wheatears that now appear pretty much every autumn”. Spring records of the former also predominate.

Pied Wheatear first occurred in Kent in October 1986, when a male was seen at Reculver, with another male at Foreness in November the following year, then a male at Sheerness in October 1994 and a female at Reculver again in November 2021. The two “Black-eared” Wheatears were seen at Bewl Water in May 1988 and Dungeness in May 1992.

As Stoddart (2021) stated, the separation of “Black-eared” and Pied Wheatears “in any plumage other than adult male is a long-standing problem (one which is exacerbated by the existence of hybrids)” and confirmed that the split of the Black-eared Wheatear species would “confound the difficulties”. Even prior to this taxonomic revision, identification difficulties had “precluded a firm attribution to species in a high proportion of records”. In cases where Pied Wheatear had been excluded, records could be assigned to the Western Black-eared/Eastern Black-eared Wheatear species pair, but more problematic individuals had to be assigned to the Western Black-eared/Eastern Black-eared/Pied Wheatear species group.

The only local record of this species group involved a female or first-winter bird seen by Ian Roberts and James Siddle at Great Hougham Court Farm on the evening of the 1<sup>st</sup> October 1992 that, although thought to have been a Pied Wheatear, could unfortunately only be accepted as belonging to the Western Black-eared/Eastern Black-eared/Pied Wheatear species group.

The record by year is shown in figure 1.

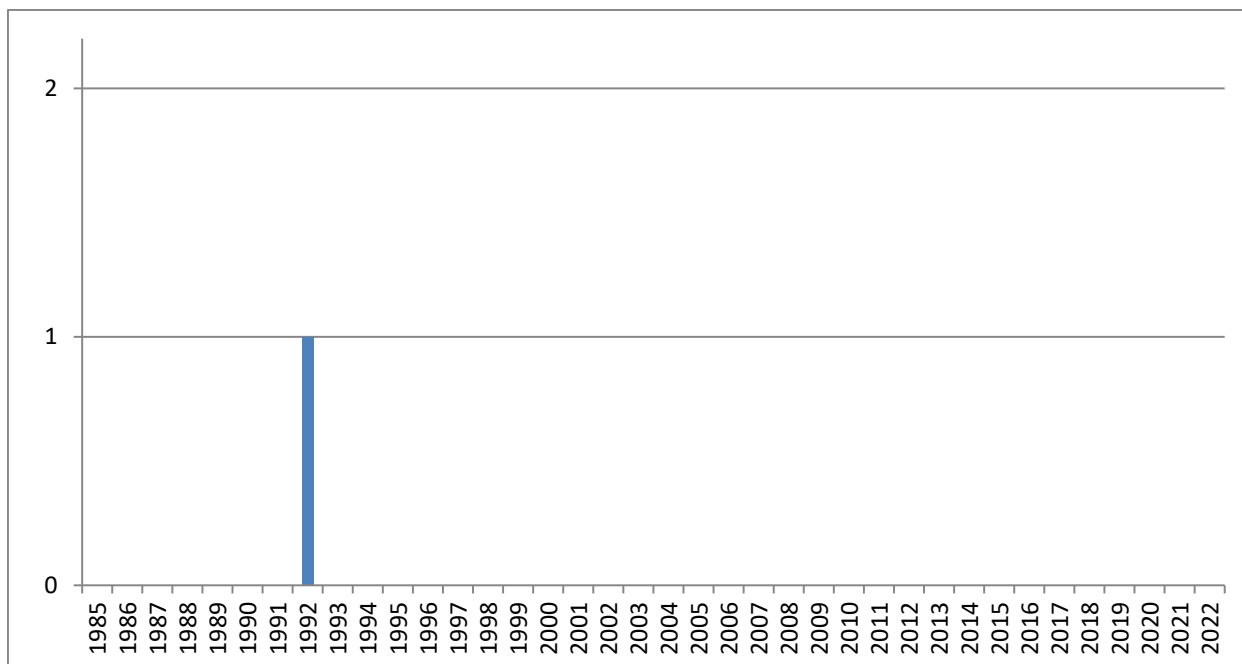


Figure 1: Western Black-eared/Eastern Black-eared/Pied Wheatear records at Folkestone and Hythe

The record by week is given in figure 2.

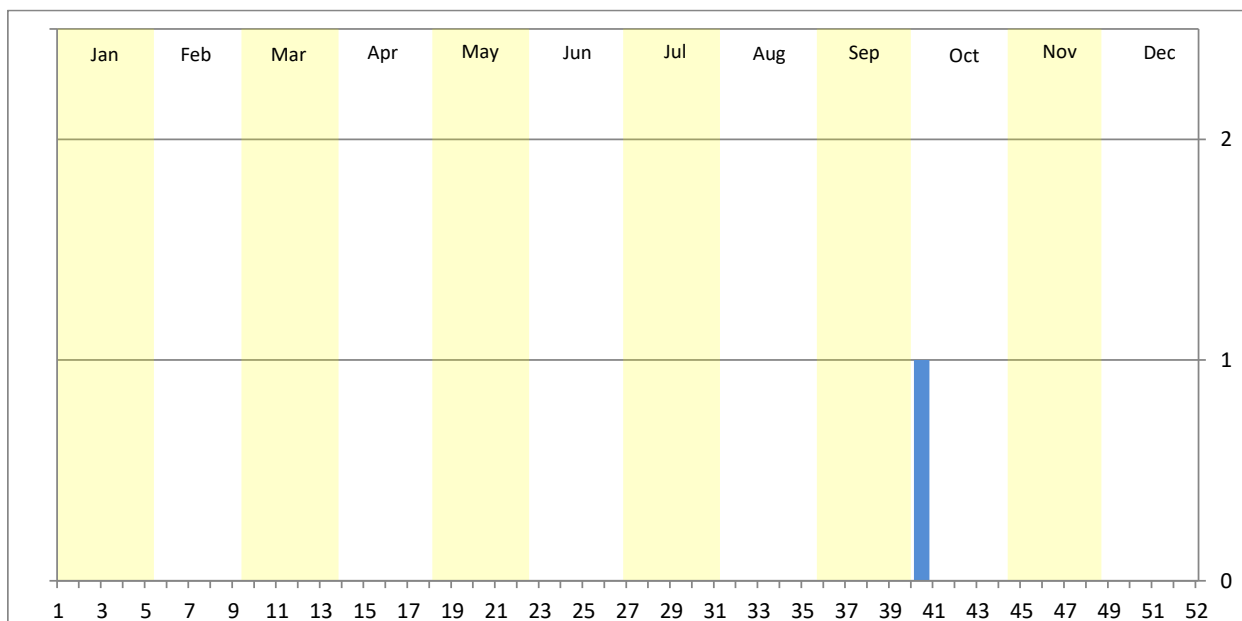


Figure 2: Western Black-eared/Eastern Black-eared/Pied Wheatear records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Figure 3 shows the location of the record by tetrad.

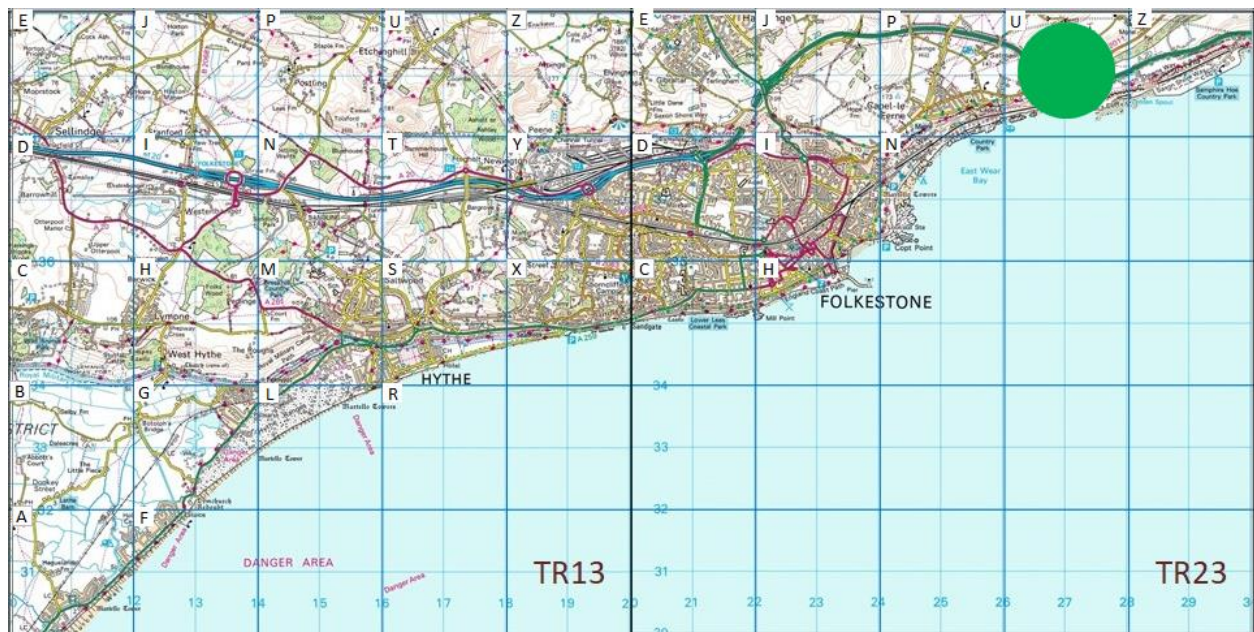


Figure 3: Distribution of all Western Black-eared/Eastern Black-eared/Pied Wheatear records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Confirmation of the only area record of the species group is as follows:

**1992** Hougham Court, female or immature, 1<sup>st</sup> October (I. A. Roberts, J. P. Siddle)

### References

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### Acknowledgements

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